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ABSTRACT

Intermediate organizations are non-profit structures active in the area of integration through economic activity aimed at reintegrating those with severe social and occupational problems into the labor market in France. With the employment crises of the past 2 decades, these organizations have been confronted by an ever-increasing demand and an imperative of rapid growth. Arising mainly from the initiatives of local activists, they were often composed of volunteers at the outset but have gradually reinforced and expanded their staffs by taking on growing numbers of salaried employees. In the process, they have achieved a particular form of professionalization, notably by integrating management imperatives into an approach that is still based on activist commitment. Indeed, these organizations have remained faithful to the ideal of civic solidarity inherent in France's Law of 1901 that has regulated community-sector organizations for over a century. (Author/YLB)

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Training & Employment

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM CEREQ AND ITS ASSOCIATED CENTRES

THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF COMMUNITY-SECTOR JOBS: The Case of Intermediate Organisations

Intermediate organisations are non-profit structures active in the area of integration through economic activity aimed at reintegrating those with severe social and occupational problems into the labour market. With the employment crises of the past two decades, these organisations have been confronted by an ever-increasing demand and an imperative of rapid growth. Arising mainly from the initiatives of local activists, they were often composed of volunteers at the outset but have gradually reinforced and expanded their staffs by taking on growing numbers of salaried employees. In the process, they have achieved a particular form of professionalisation, notably by integrating management imperatives into an approach which is still based on activist commitment. Indeed, these organisations have remained faithful to the ideal of civic solidarity inherent in France's venerable Law of 1901 which has been regulating community-sector organisations for more than a century.

Created in 1987, the "intermediate organisations" are non-profit structures as defined by the Law of 1901. Their objective is the reintegration of individuals in great social and occupational difficulty into the labour market. As structures for integration through economic activity, they hire unemployed "beneficiaries" in order to make them available—on a remunerative basis—to third parties including individuals, other non-profit organisations or companies to carry out sporadic tasks which are not handled by private initiatives or public groups. Within each intermediate organisation, this activity is run by "permanent staff" who may be paid or volunteer workers.

These structures, which are directly involved in the field, have generally arisen from initiatives of local activists, most often volunteers. Confronted by ever-increasing demand, they have not only had to expand their personnel rapidly via growing numbers of paid employees but also to professionalise the permanent staff. The term 'professionalisation' is used here to include the gradual acquisition of the mastery of a work activity by the person carrying it out, the enrichment of the content of this activity and the process of structuring a work group. But what happens to the founders' activist spirit with the professionalisation of the community job? Doesn't the permanent staff of the intermediate organisations run the risk of losing the civic dimension proper to the spirit of the 1901 law? These questions, which concern community-sector employment as a whole, are of particular importance for those organisations specifically involved in the area of social service.

In fact, what has become of the small organisations for integration which have sprung up in the wake of the government's struggle against unemployment since the crisis of the 1980s? These structures resolve the potentially divergent aims of providing a quality service and ensuring the continuation of their activity by maintaining the activist stance of their permanent staff who, even when they are paid for their work, still do not become "ordinary employees".

VOLUNTEERS AND PAID STAFF

In its early stages, such an organisation has very limited financial resources at its disposal. It has a minimum of paid employees and systematically relies on subsidised work contracts. When volunteers are directly involved in the organisation's activity "in the field", they are at the heart of the structure and generally carry out a significant share of the work. The first recruitments are thus defined to complement the volunteers' capacity for participation. At

the outset, moreover, the paid director is often chosen from the activists who have set up the organisation on a volunteer basis. Apart from this director, the only paid employees are generally the intake secretaries, who are employed on a short-term basis through government-sponsored job-training contracts (*contrats emploi-solidarité*, CES). Their presence is thus doubly temporary, insofar as they can only be employed on a half-time basis and have to leave the organisation at the end of their contract, often giving their place to a new intake secretary on a CES. At this stage, the classic opposition between paid employees incarnating continuity and volunteers whose presence is temporary has little sense in the context of the intermediate organisations. Indeed, the situation is just the opposite—although they are only present on a part-time basis, the volunteers are the ones who guarantee continuity over time, especially when the organisation does not yet have a director.

But this situation does not last. As the activity expands, the discontinuous intervention of the "permanent staff", whether these are volunteers or paid workers, poses a growing problem. The solutions adopted to remedy it reinforce the role of the paid staff relative to that of the volunteers by stabilising the situation of existing employees. Since 1994, the intermediate organisations have in fact been authorised to transform CESs into what are known as consolidated job contracts (*contrats emploi consolidé*, CEC) and have thus been able to lengthen the employment period for intake secretaries. In addition, the organisation recruits new employees, most often through other subsidised contracts (for job re-entry, job initiatives or, most recently, youth jobs) which permit full-time positions from the outset. Thus, after what is often an intermediate phase of about thirty hours a week, the number of hours worked is ultimately stabilised between thirty-five and thirty-nine. Volunteer staff "in the field" does not benefit from this wave of recruitments to attain employee status. The fact that their interventions remain sporadic increases the gap between them and the paid staff, who are present in greater number, enjoy higher job status and work longer hours. The volunteers, who are now less present than the paid employees, but also less and less indispensable, find themselves increasingly marginalised as they abandon their core activities to the paid newcomers for more peripheral support or advisory tasks.

For the intermediate organisations, the choice of continuity is necessary in the face of the growing scale of their activity. This continuity in the intervention of permanent staff facilitates professionalisation but it does not mean that "permanent staff" and "professional" are synonymous. The means of building and developing competences within the community structures also come into play.

AMATEURISM AND PROFESSIONALISM

Intermediate organisations have generally emerged from the initiatives of local activists who, in a burst of solidarity, brought their entourage with them. As a result, most of the volunteers who initially embarked on such an adventure did not have specific competences for dealing with the problems they were to encounter. Indeed, the first staff members, whether volunteers or paid employees, were almost all "amateurs". Making a virtue of necessity, the heads of the organisations profited from the financial imperative of recourse to subsidised contracts in order to manifest their desire for direct solidarity with those who were excluded from the working world. Notably they hired their intake secretaries (on CESs) from young women with vocational-training certificates (CAPs or BEPs) who were facing difficulties in the school-to-work transition. The idea was to allow them to benefit from this contract in order to acquire an initial work experience, which they could subsequently exploit on the labour market.

But amateurism rapidly revealed its limits. The need to preserve the financial advantages tied to the CESs imposed a continuous turnover, which meant that the strategic position of the intake secretary was constantly occupied by inexperienced employees. This process considerably slowed down the professionalisation of the activity at the very time that it was becoming increasingly complex because of the deterioration of the employment situation in the early 1990s and the resulting aggravation of the difficulties of the target public. In addition, since the former intake secretaries often had great difficulty in finding a skilled job after their period with the organisation, this policy of direct solidarity was abandoned as soon as the organisation's material conditions permitted it.

In 1994, the possibility of using the CEC—in the form of an unlimited-term contract or a five-year fixed-term contract—marked a turning point for the intermediate organisations by allowing them to opt for the professionalisation of their permanent staff. Their primary objective was the improvement of the quality of the service provided, while the least-cost criterion became secondary. This policy was concretely reflected in the composition of the team and the forms of competence building, which took place at a pace which obviously depended on each group's financial situation but in a way that was fairly similar from one organisation to another.

Now, the team of paid permanent staff is gradually reinforced, first of all by stabilising the work contracts: as soon as they are well integrated into the team, the paid employees (generally the intake secretaries, but not

COMMUNITY-SECTOR JOBS

The term 'community-sector job' covers a wide variety of situations. Out of 730,000 'functioning' organisations, 610,000 (or 85 %) operate solely with volunteers, whose numbers are estimated at 10.4 million. The remaining 120,000 organisations (15 %) have a total of 1.2 million salaried employees, representing 4.5 percent of the labour force. The salaried posts are concentrated: 20 percent of these organisations, generally large, institutionalised structures of long standing, account for 80 percent of the salaried employees.

Social service is at the forefront of community-sector employment with 40 percent of the jobs concerned. A dynamic field that creates many new jobs, it doubled the number of its employees between 1980 and 1990 and has continued to grow at the same rate. The number of salaried employees in the community-based social sector is now estimated at 500,000, corresponding to 380,000 'full-time equivalents'.

At the end of the year 2000, this sector had some 2,000 organisations for integration through economic activity, including 950 intermediate organisations.

exclusively) at the end of their CESs have their contracts transformed into CECs. But the team is also expanded, with the creation of a few positions targeting specific profiles in response to perceived needs. The presence of an accountant, for example, becomes unavoidable. And depending on the direction it chooses to take, the intermediate organisation may also recruit someone to supervise coaching, a sales representative to expand the clientele or a technician responsible for follow-up of job assignments. The objective is no longer the recruitment of individuals in difficulty but rather the integration of candidates who, through their training or previous work experience, already have the competences likely to enhance the collective effort.

This reinforcement of the team allows it to pursue the development of the specific competences it needs more efficiently than before. It has sufficient in-house resources to provide for the basic training of its members. Beyond the transmission of current practices from veterans to newcomers, everyone's professional know-how is enriched through the sharing of the previously acquired knowledge of the new staff members.

The professionalisation of permanent staff also draws on resources outside the organisation. Team members may thus participate in brief off-the-job-training programmes to learn the use of computer software, for example, or workshops closely related to the organisation's missions. The latter are generally run by a network specialised in the area of integration through economic activity, the Fédération des Comités et organismes d'aide aux chômeurs par l'emploi (Federation of Committees and Bodies for Assistance to the Unemployed through Employment, COORACE). Indeed, the organisation's membership in this network, or in the Fédération nationale des Associations d'accueil et de reinsertion sociale (National Federation of Host Organisations for Social Reintegration, FNARS), promotes professionalisation insofar as it facilitates contact between groups, allows the dissemination of fruitful initiatives, provides access to legal advice and so on. Certain networks go beyond this classic role, moreover, and encourage collective discussion on the practices of intermediate organisations, such as the improvement of client reception or coaching methods.

Such professionalisation of permanent staff is a necessary response to the challenges now confronting the intermediate organisations:

- Maintaining the structure's economic viability while continuing to welcome beneficiaries who are far removed from employment;
- Adapting to the constant changes in legal texts and measures concerning employment policy;
- Computerising the system in order to meet the Ministry of Employment's demands for statistical data.

Nonetheless, this trend towards professionalisation does not consist of adopting a corporate management model. The specific nature of the intermediate organisations' mission has not been forgotten; on the contrary, professionalisation takes a specific form which is based on an activist commitment.

PROFESSIONALISM AND ACTIVISM

The juxtaposition of the adjectives "professional" and "activist" might seem incongruous in light of the deep-rooted idea that personal commitment and professional activity must remain separate. However, the intermediate organisations do not consider themselves bound by such a dichotomy.

Indeed, the sharing of common values and the activist approach are precisely what make the diverse backgrounds of staff members an advantage rather than an obstacle to communication. And this commitment is a key criterion for recruitment—even when the organisation decides to recruit professionals, it only considers candidates with a "social streak". To be sure, training and previous experience are also taken into account, but in general, the organisation is less demanding in this respect than most other employers. Its permanent staff are almost systematically recruited from the ranks of job seekers, and often the long-term unemployed. In this way, the intermediate organisations firmly reject the pessimistic hypothesis that those who are still in difficulty will be avoided by those have succeeded in finding a job. On the contrary, and apparently with reason, they count on the shared experience of unemployment as a means of strengthening the solidarity between staff members and beneficiaries.

The convictions widely shared by the intermediate organisations thus establish the contours of a specific professional identity: a welcome based on openness and sociability, a vision of work as an essential element of socialisation, but also a genuine concern for determining the beneficiary's real expectations rather than imposing the values of the organisation. Without exception, the spread of the "managerial culture" imposed by increasingly complex and changing regulations does not relegate the social aims to the background. There is obviously a concern for preserving the organisation's financial equilibrium—the prerequisite for maintaining the permanent posts—but it does not seem to compromise the attention paid to beneficiaries' interests.

Nor has the fact that paid staff undertake almost all their professional activity as an activist commitment imposed a single model of professionalisation. In practice, the intermediate organisations' double kinship—with sheltered jobs on the one hand and temporary work on the other—creates a tension between two complementary but somewhat contradictory objectives: giving priority to the most disadvantaged beneficiaries and generating sufficient turnover to guarantee the permanence of the structure. In function of the local economic and social situation, the organisation's size and the state of its finances, the professional profiles of its leadership or the presence or absence of volunteer staff, each organisation gradually makes one or the other of these goals its priority. This decision influences the forms of professionalisation, notably through resulting choices in terms of recruitment and organisation of work.

Two opposing forms of professionalisation may thus be observed within the intermediate organisations:

- Versatility, mainly in the small and medium-sized organisations which favour the development of personalised itineraries, regardless of the beneficiary's distance from employment;

• Specialisation, generally in medium-sized or large organisations and systematically in structures seeking to provide the most possible work to a core of beneficiaries relatively close to employment.

Far from being uniform, the professionalisation process is tied to each organisation's interpretation of its mission. But if it has a certain liberty in assessing its goals and means, the intermediate organisation is nonetheless bound to respect its basic mission of integration, through the activist commitment of the entire team. And ultimately it is the alchemy of professionalism and activism which allows it to find its own equilibrium by integrating both the demands of rigorous management and the dynamics of service to the beneficiary.

It might be thought that by becoming professionals of integration through economic activity, the staff of the intermediate organisations would gradually distance themselves from the spirit of civic solidarity motivating the founders of these organisations, who were often volunteers. Such is not the case, however; the volunteers do indeed give way to paid staff members but this does not compromise the values of social service. Beyond their divergences over the particular competences to be favoured, the intermediate organisations manifest a common attachment to the activist dimension of their work. Far from turning their backs on solidarity, they develop a culture of service and personnel commitment based on an activist professional identity, which borrows certain tools from the managerial model without, however, identifying with it. The spirit of the Law of 1901 is still going strong, and in the intermediate organisations, as is probably case in most of the young community-sector organisations, professional know-how means social service.

Christophe Guitton and Agnès Legay (Céreq)

A TWO-YEAR STUDY ON INTERMEDIATE ORGANISATIONS

The analysis presented in this issue of *Training and Employment* is based on a study carried out in response to an invitation to tender from the Research Mission of the French Ministry of Employment and Solidarity (MIRE) on the topic "Producing solidarities—the role of the organisations". This study, focusing on professionalisation processes within the intermediate organisations, was conducted by Céreq and two of its associated regional centres, the Groupe de recherche sur l'éducation et l'emploi (GREE) at the Université de Nancy II and the "Droit et Changement Social" (Law and social change) centre at the Université de Nantes.

The research in the field, which took place in 1998 and 1999, involved fourteen intermediate organisations in three of France's administrative regions, Lorraine, Pays-de-la Loire and Province-Alpes-Côte d'Azur. Semi-directive interviews and an analysis of documents tracing the history of the organisations provided the basis for individual case studies of the organisations involved. These structures, each of which had between two and twenty salaried employees, were the result of relatively recent local initiatives. Most of them originated in community-sector initiatives of a political, charitable or entrepreneurial nature. Certain arose from institutional initiatives, under the impetus of a local administration or an already existing structure in the social-service domain. Some of the organisations studied had spun off from other structures but were almost always autonomous.

The complete results of this research are available in a recent Céreq publication:

La professionalisation de l'emploi associatif. L'exemple des permanents des associations intermédiaires.
[The professionalisation of community-sector jobs. The case of intermediate organisation staff.]
Agnès Legay
Document no. 158, "Observatoire" series, Céreq, July 2001.

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